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Report

Review of JM's book, 'My First Coup D'etat and other true stories from Africa's lost decades

by John Dramani Mahama on Tuesday, August 28, 2012 at 11:58pm ·

Book Review Essay

Title: MY FIRST COUP D'ETAT

Author: John Dramani Mahama

Publisher: Bloomsbury, New York, 2012. 318 pp.

Reviewer: Colin Essamuah

OUR NEW PRESIDENT, IN HIS OWN WORDS.

President John Dramani Mahama has published and launched his first book with the arresting title MY FIRST COUP D'ETAT just over a month ago, a month filled with the sad news of the sudden, unexpected death of Ghana's President, Professor John Evans Atta Mills. Indeed, the author, then the Vice President of the Republic of Ghana, returned to Ghana after a successful book launch in the United States, and soon afterwards, he had to assume the highest office in the country when President Mills died suddenly on July 24, 2012. Understandably, therefore, any review of what would have been an interesting romança clef of a rising Ghanaian politician must take note of the fact that he has been thrust unexpectedly, into the most powerful job in Ghana. As a President now completing the unexpired term of his deceased predecessor, author John Dramani Mahama is due for confirmation as his party's presidential candidate at the end of August this year, to take part in the presidential elections taking place in December 2012.

John Dramani Mahama is arguably the first Ghanaian President [to be precise, Vice President at the time of publication] to gift his people with a record of not only the highlights of his life, but also share with us the forcing-grounds of his political development and ideas and his perspectives on the Ghanaian and African political situation. Kwame Nkrumah's seminal Autobiography came out in the year of independence from colonial rule in 1957, after he had spent six years as Prime Minister. President Nkrumah's earlier work, Towards Colonial Freedom, a slim volume that I personally consider his best book, was published in London sometime in 1947, before he returned home in December that same year to begin his political career as the General Secretary of the United Gold Coast Convention. There was no inkling in Nkrumah's work that he would eventually become the most famous African political figure to date.

Professors Kofi Abrefa Busia and John Evans Atta Mills had written widely and approvingly in their respective academic fields before becoming the chief executives of state. But John Dramani Mahama is the first to consciously pen a book tailored to his political beliefs and ambitions at the cusp of ultimate power, albeit handed to him in the midst of a national tragedy. Before this book, Ghanaians intuit the innermost feelings of our leading politicians by the ideology their parties preach, the manifestoes that are churned out, and recorded political speeches and boilerplate of the media. President Mahama with this book, thus blazes a trail that other politicians should imitate, to the advantage of the Ghanaian electorate as it seeks a fuller knowledge of those who seek their mandate to rule.

These facts obviously invest this book with much more than a passing interest; it is the first autobiographical insight Ghanaians can have of the person who is their current President.

The book is made up of nineteen chapters, including an introduction and an acknowledgement, which is the last chapter. The writing style is smooth, conversational and folksy, just as the assured mid-atlantic English accent of the author on the political stump. But the easy style is an excellent vehicle for retailing in a convincing manner, the important landmarks of his parentage, youth, education, student politics, national service, early working life here in Ghana and in Nigeria, and his trip to and back from the then Soviet Union in 1985-86.

My First Coup D'etat is a chronicle of the first thirty years of the author's life, and it brings to mind Winston Churchill's My Early Years, which already a national figure in British politics around the beginning of the twentieth century. The introduction is essential to understanding the structure of the story, the overlapping admixtures and the easy writing style. The earlier parts of the work had been hesitant records of his discovery of writing as a vocation, and the escape route for the tumultuous landmarks in his life. The February 24, 1966 coup which figures in the title, marked the watershed event in his life [he was 7 years old at the time], that to him, symbolised the hopes, the history, and the trajectory of his own upbringing, the political, economic and social story of his native Ghana, and onto the larger continental canvas, the African condition of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1990s. It is a riveting tale told by a person with a deep love of his family, his community and his country. President Mahama loves this country, and is not ashamed to retail the funny, the awkward and the unpleasant parts of the Ghanaian story as they impacted on his own life, and claiming the ups and downs as necessary stops on the voyage to personal and national self-discovery.

It is a story told in colourful vignettes of village life in Damongo and Bole, city life in Tamale, Kumasi and in Accra, and outside the country in Nigeria, the Soviet Union [as it then was], and also in the United Kingdom. As a student of history, he notes along the way, important changes and attitudes in dress, speech, social and traditional norms and practices, and the overwhelming and consuming effects on every aspect of Ghanaian and African life of the lost decades, that is, the period that the continent was dominated by elected leaders who had overstayed their welcome, unelected leaders who had shot their way into power, and the general malaise that attended the dreary political landscape.

An important insight critical to understanding, and appreciating the personality of our new President, is the realisation, through the stories here, that he is not your usual Northern politician, stuck in the regionalist politics peculiar to the political and social conditions of the part of the country he hails from, but by a unique set of circumstances of parentage and education, President Mahama is very much the archetypical Ghanaian, at home in all parts of this country, and thus a formidable national politician in his own right. His father, a senior member of President Nkrumah's Convention Peoples Party who rose

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to become a Minister of State, and after the 1966 coup that overthrew the Nkrumah government, a successful rice farmer in the Northern Region, is the key to grasping the outlook on life of our President. The elder Mahama, who himself was the beneficiary of Western education forced upon him by a determined British District Commissioner, believed passionately in the power of education to transform and ennoble the circumstances of birth and place, and that is exactly what he bestowed and bequeathed to all his children.

Arguably, President Mahama was his favourite child, and he placed the young John Dramani in institutions that reflected his own desire to prove the overall efficacy of education to transform one's situation in life. Educated at Achimota Primary School, Ghana Secondary School in Tamale, and then in the premier institution of tertiary education in this country, the University of Ghana, where he took a degree in History, President Mahama enjoyed a level of upbringing, and a depth of social interaction which has produced a person steeped in the Ghana that we in the southern part of the country take for granted as the normal path to building and sustaining our relatively new Ghanaian identities. It is instructive that all these institutions were boarding establishments. He lived and operated smoothly in the register of the prototypical Ghanaian student and young man.

The other remarkable fact about our new President is the fact that he is a member of a truly pan-West African family. He has solid kin relations in Kumasi, Accra, Bole, Damongo, Tamale, all in Ghana, and in Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and other places in between. These are relations firmly settled in their respective towns and cities for generations before the President was born, and ever ready and willing to extend the courtesies of kinship across the subregion to all members. President Mahama is the proof, if proof were needed, that the Mole-Dagbani ethnic group, its languages and several dialects, is the archetypical West African ethnic identity. No wonder he is fluent in several Ghanaian languages, and speaks them without any discernible accents. President Mahama's constant references to the artificiality of our national borders are thus apposite and well-grounded.

I am very certain that the most important parts of this life story is the record of his political and ideological development into the person he has become, at the pinnacle of power in Ghana. He tells of his filial attachment to his father, and the unsurprising sharing in elder Mahama's Nkrumaist beliefs. But like most students of his generation, he first encountered definite political thoughts from the feet of Mr. Wentum, his literature tutor at Ghanasco in Tamale in his secondary school days. This period coincided with the degeneration of the General Acheampong regime in the mid-1970s, the introduction and referendum on the concept of Union Government, and his own harrowing participation in national politics on the day of the vote, March 30, 1978. Wentum was a flaming leftist, preaching liquidation of all capitalists, including the wealthy elder Mahama, much to the discomfiture of the impressionable Dramani. By the time he reached the University of Ghana, he was ready to try his hands at elected leadership [he had been a prefect at Ghanasco, but that was appointive] as a Commonwealth Hall JCR Vice President. He lost, because he was aloof from the wild social life of the Vandals' residence. The following year, however, he won university-wide elections to become the SRC Secretary for the whole university, a phenomenal indication of the heights of his ambitions.

For his national service, he went back to his alma mater Ghanasco to teach, a period marked by the wanton brutalities of the early PNDC from which he experienced unpleasant incidents from rampaging lawless soldiers in Tamale policing the curfew, with one involving his younger brother in the same school, unbeknownst to him till the next day.

President Mahama after his national service, joined his father in exile from the PNDC in Nigeria, to work and secure funds to pursue further education, and start adult life. This was cut short, in 1983, by the Nigerian equivalent of Ghana's 1970 Aliens Compliance Order, and he had to return home to Ghana, whilst his father relocated to the United Kingdom. The story of how he managed to gain admission to Legon again to pursue the graduate course in Communication Studies, giving him his first firm foundation for his vocation, makes fascinating reading, and provides hard evidence that as a nation, we have made progress on all fronts, though with the election campaign in full swing at the moment, one would be tempted to believe life stopped for Ghanaians a long time ago.

As part of his political maturation, President Mahama was selected, with other Ghanaians, one of whom was my classmate, to study social psychology in the then Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev, at the very period that the communist system, in place for 70 years, was collapsing under the weight of its own internal contradictions. He does not tell us the processes by which he was selected, as this would have marked his acceptance of the PNDC which had driven his beloved father into exile.

Naturally, as a sensitive and observant young person, he was tempered by the experience, but remains to this day still a left politician, the result of his twin Nkrumaist heritage from his father, and the specific age in which he achieved full political consciousness. This may appear a conundrum to the uninitiated in Ghanaian politics, and a puzzle to his ideological adversaries in the NPP who wrongly believe, that education and wealth, a predominantly Southern Ghana [and therefore Akan, in their estimation] phenomenon, must persuade one to share their liberal, free market beliefs. His social democracy is the twin of the Christian stewardship of the faith of millions of Ghanaians, and I am inclined to accept his ideology as genuine.

On his return home to his fatherland, he did what essentially was a personal reprise, a pilgrimage of the soul, of the meaning of the coup d'état that changed the staid comfortable scion of a national politician into what he has become today. He took a taxi to the Kanda residence in which the elder Mahama was staying with the family, the very place from which the 1966 coup and its implications of immediate unceremonious ejection, removal to Tamale, etc, had marked him for life. Then to his primary boarding school at Achimota, and from there to the house at the Ringway Estates in Accra where the family had relocated after his father's release from political detention after the 1966 coup. The search for rootedness in a newer, prospering Ghana was also filled with doubts on the way forward for himself and the country. Those doubts, ever-present, were part of the life he had led to that point in his life. But like the faith he had in fate to turn things around, doubt is also very much part of the genuine hopes that he felt for both himself and his country.

This is where the story ends, and we have to await further volumes to enter into the mind and life of our President from then on to his successful participation in national politics. This national political journey began first with his election as the Member of Parliament for Bole-Bamboi constituency [same constituency as his father], in the western part of the Northern Region of Ghana from January 1997 to January 2009, as Deputy Minister and then a full Minister of State, and thereafter to his elevation to the number two position as Ghana's Vice President from January 2009, and since 2.16 pm of Tuesday, July 24, 2012, as the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Republic of Ghana. It is

hoped that we shall not have to wait too long for the resumption of the fascinating story of our President.

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Daakyehene Kusi Agyemang-Badu You deserve to be our next leader, may the good Lord guide and protect you. You've already been endorsed and we'll vote massively for you to be in that high office, stay blessed!

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Justice Ankrah need a copy!!!!!!....

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Kyei Obed Ooh my God am very happy to see you here am your number one fan and i can say all my family members endorsed you' no matter what the npp would do or say you are our next leader. GOD BLESS GHANA!

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Prince Mo Insha-Allah u are just the chosen 1 to lead nd bring the vision 2020 into reality.

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Diff Rence may allah mak yu da next president

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Jonas Kwami Sevor Mr president i know for sure that come next year u'll still be called Mr president. AMEN

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Benjamin Sekyi i nef a copy badly.where can i get one?

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Simon Adams Nartey God shall endorse you as Prez again in Dec 2012. Amen

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Sitsofe Konglo i will pray for u and i know u will be the head but not the tail

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Nyadzi Samuel u are already anointed H.E.thus a great story.

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Joseph Kancha it is in de right direction Mr prez becos u have alot that u can finish it in your life time , so put it in innk 4 de next generation.

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Jerry Kelly Nyarko His Excellency, God is on our side,victory shall be ours.

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Muntaka Gariba victory victory victory victory will be 4 NDC dis 2012 by de grace of GOD.Prez Mahama 4 eva.NDC 4 LIFE

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Mak Eben What a man!u are a victor..

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Anthony Afrane Terrific Elizabethan English!

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Francis Osei Tutu Mr President, I wish you well.

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Kayla Linda Asimah God is on our side

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Addai Emmanuel Mr.prs is de tank u tour among de funeral burget.

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Ibrahim Ibn Abdallah All praises and thanks be to Almighty Allah, for

that gifts.

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Awo Dzifa heyi le fimi....

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Belinda Adzomani-Diapim May God be with you

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Eben Agla Narh Johnny i sure your victory for 2012

August 30 at 9:48am · [Like](#)



Daniel Biney pls sir am a great fun of urs and will like u to become a prez.and this an advise i will like u to use to run ur compain 4 this year in kasoa.

August 30 at 10:38am · [Like](#)



Justice Adoboe Please, we are waiting for the speech to finish our story. please, be fast with it.

August 30 at 11:22am · [Like](#)



Donkor Michael Osae life is all abt what is within you from God not what we came to pick on earth. give what is within you. thank you my president.

August 30 at 2:04pm · [Like](#)



Casely B. Essamuah Amazing that all the comments reflects on the subject of the book and not the author of the review - shows you did a great job representing him well. Will pick up through other media.

August 31 at 8:08am · [Like](#)



Magdalene Onaa Baah am honoured 2 make a comment prezo for I knw the plans i hv for u, declares the Lord, plans 2 prosper u and nt 2 harm u, plans 2 gv u hope and a futvre. jeremiah 29: 11.

August 31 at 4:50pm via mobile · [Like](#)



Rippson Princewahi infact i luv u a president.and i wish you a successful coming election,

September 1 at 6:26am · [Like](#)



Azizi Patrick Whether "ALL DIE BE DIE" party likes it or not you will win 7th Dec. elections by the grace of Allah.Prez. JM relax and have a good sleep any time you to bed.

September 1 at 8:37am · [Like](#)



Dzifa Doya He uses d tax payers money to embark on some nonsensical & stupid thank u tour & u unemployed, hungry NDC bootlickers praise him for it. This is baloney & most foolish!

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Paa-Kwasi A. Boat "All the decisions I have made in my life were regularly plagued with doubt. It can be challenging to sustain that feeling of hope or the belief that things will turn

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Ibrahim Baba @Paa kwasi, thats why you are a president with a decisive nature.

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Naa Koley @ Dzifa u mean to say if it nana who is in power he will not tank d pple pls stop d insult it will not help d future generation
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Kofi Okoampah Akoto God has just began with you.
September 4 at 10:50pm via mobile · [Like](#)



Kwame Boafo Akuffo In this country we abandon reason and nurture emotions. How can a govt presiding over a vanishing national currency catch your fancy. I hazard a guess. Is it a celebration of mediocrity.
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Alhaji Haruna V-MATE !!!
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